

# Breathless for Blue Jeans

Health hazards in China's denim factories

**“Everyone has the right to life, the right to work, to free choice of employment, to just and favourable conditions of work...” Universal Declaration on Human Rights**

Blue jeans are big business, and in recent years fashion designers have created new demand for denim which comes with a pre-worn look. Sandblasting and hand sanding, chemical spraying and a host of other techniques are used in order to create this look. There are two major types of sandblasting processes: manual and mechanical sandblasting. Both can be deadly. Manual sandblasting is performed by individual workers manually operating an air gun attached to a hose and compressor, from which the sand is blasted under high pressure to distress the denim. This remains most common in garment-producing countries in the global South, and is often used without installing proper ventilation equipment, exposing workers directly to silica particles that are released from air compressor guns. These tiny particles of blasted sand (silica dust), if inhaled, can cause severe respiratory problems for workers; in cases of intense or long-term exposure, inhalation can lead to fatal diseases such as silicosis and lung cancer.

The new report, *Breathless for Blue Jeans*, from Clean Clothes Campaign, IHLO, SACOM and War on Want investigated six factories in south China, where much of the world's denim is

produced. The aims of the research were to determine to what extent the deadly technique of sandblasting jeans was still being used, to assess other potentially harmful finishing practices involved in denim production at the selected factories, and to see what measures were being taken to minimise or eliminate the potential risks.

The factories produce for major brands including Lee, Levi's, H&M, Hollister, Old Navy, Wrangler, Faded Glory, Duo, Jack & Jones, Only, Phard, CLRIDE.n, Vero Moda, Lee Lang, Cabbeen, American Eagle and local brands Yishon and Zhenzhi Jeans. Numerous workers in each of the six factories were interviewed for this report. Draft copies of the report were sent to the majority of brands listed in the report and/or shown on photos taken at the factories purporting to be clients. We received responses from six companies clarifying their relationship to the factories. The responses included Levi Strauss, Bestseller (Vero Moda, Jack & Jones, Only), H&M and the VF Corporation (Lee and Wrangler). Both Levi Strauss and H&M provided additional details, and reported that in at least one case company management had assured them of the dismantling and removal of sandblasting equipment.

Research in the six factories revealed that only one factory, Gloss Mind, had fully eliminated its sandblasting production line. While three factories (Yida, Golden City and Conshing) had officially announced that they were to abolish the practice of sandblasting, our investigations (including direct workers' testimony) revealed that the practice may not have been discontinued at all. One factory reportedly continued its sandblasting on the sly, surreptitiously dismantling the sandblasting machinery and hiding it in advance of inspections – a practice also uncovered by Levi Strauss

during factory assessments of one of its suppliers in 2011. Factories had also concealed their sandblasting units behind locked doors and had increased security for these units, limiting access solely to the sandblasters. Instead of being eliminated, therefore, sandblasting seems to be morphing into a more covert operation, potentially creating an even deadlier workplace environment.

The report reveals that regardless of whether a brand has 'banned' sandblasting or not, the practice continues. The research also makes clear that the shift away from sandblasting practices does not necessarily translate into improved working conditions, nor has it led to significant improvements in the provision of protective equipment for workers involved in the finishing of denim products using other methods. We found that many of the other finishing processes continued to expose workers to extreme risks because the processes were seldom, if ever, performed in a safe manner. All six factories appeared to be non-compliant with health and safety regulations – research revealed that workers who were engaged in hand-sanding, polishing or chemical treatment processes had neither been properly trained in the proper use of the equipment and materials, nor had been provided with adequate protection such as proper mouth masks and goggles. High levels of fabric fibres and sand dust in the air drastically increase the risk not only of silicosis but also potentially of other respiratory and pulmonary diseases.

The report also uncovered widespread violations in such areas as working hours, excessive overtime, freedom of association and employee contracts, thus painting a bleak picture of a garment industry that relies on migrant workers who have little choice but to risk their own health and welfare to earn a meagre living, manufacturing jeans for mostly large, high-profile brands.

## A global ban

In 2009, in response to the growing awareness of the deaths and illnesses among young denim workers in Turkey and a massive local campaign, the Turkish government introduced a national ban on the use of sandblasting in the garment industry. In 2010 a global campaign against the use of sandblasting was launched, which in turn led to public bans from over 40 major denim brands. However, in March 2012 a report by Clean Clothes Campaign revealed the continuing prevalence of sandblasting in denim production in Bangladesh and the appalling standards of occupational health and safety there. The findings from this new report on China are sadly similar to the research in Bangladesh: manual sandblasting remains a common practice and is seldom used in conjunction with the recommended safety measures, while other denim finishing processes pose health risks from which the workers are inadequately protected. Moreover, there is very little awareness among the employees about sandblasting-related health risks.





1. A hand-sanding worker using sand paper for polishing, Conshing factory, Guangdong Province

2. Polishing department at Conshing factory, Guangdong Province

3. Stone wheel polishing department at Yida factory, Guangdong Province

This report provides recommendations that could eliminate sandblasting in the garment industry on a global level. The report concludes that it is not effective to simply ban the practice in one line of production; it is necessary for brands to take the initiative to assist their suppliers in eliminating these practices altogether. This will ensure a more effective ban on the deadly practice among producers and will set the stage for governments to ban it outright. Monitoring alone is not a realistic solution, given the enormous breadth of the violations and the deadly nature of the risks posed. The only realistic solution is a global ban on all sandblasting techniques. Transparency in a brand's supply chain is essential: brands should publicly disclose the locations of their suppliers and subcontractors where their denim products are manufactured.

It is also vital that brands investigate and protect workers from harmful effects of other denim finishing techniques as well as remedy ongoing violations of international and local labour laws on overtime, rest periods, wages, social security payments and medical check-ups. Training workers on how to use protective gear and on the hazards of the sandblasting materials and the chemicals they are expected to work with must begin prior to the commencement of their employment. Full disclosure of all of the hazardous materials in use must also be provided.

## Recommendations

### 1) Governments

We call on all national governments to introduce an immediate ban on sandblasting, to monitor its enforcement and the application of OHS rules, and to improve working conditions of workers in the denim industry. Governments should support all workers in obtaining social and medical assistance, as well as disability pensions from the state.

### 2) Brands

We call on all brands to commit to a ban on sandblasting in their own production lines, and ensure that the ban is complied with. Brands should also press for the phasing out of sandblasting in their suppliers' other production lines, and assist them in safe alternative solutions. Brands should not work with suppliers that refuse to phase out sandblasting across all their production lines. Brands must ensure that proper training and adequate safety equipment are provided to all workers employed in alternative processes such as hand-sanding, polishing, fringing and chemical treatments. Brands should undertake comprehensive risk assessments when introducing any new production methods, using the UN Guiding Principles and Framework as their guide as they undertake extensive due diligence prior to embarking on new or revised techniques.



Photo: SACOM



**Worker wearing two masks to prevent inhaling cotton dust, Yida factory, Guangdong Province**

Brands can play a further role in ending the practice of sandblasting by adapting their fashion designs away from distressed denim to curb demand, or introducing genuinely safe alternative methods that will achieve a similar look. In addition, brands can support an end to sandblasting by altering their suppliers' production schedules and eliminating tight deadlines to ensure that sandblasting becomes increasingly unnecessary. Unit prices and purchasing practices should reflect fair payment for workers, in order to remove the need for risk taking in the quest for sufficient pay. Brands must work with suppliers to ensure that workers are paid a living wage for regular working hours of no more 48 hours a week.

Brands should introduce comprehensive monitoring processes of their supplier factories in cooperation with trade unions and NGOs in production countries. Moreover, brands should strive for much higher occupational health and safety standards from their suppliers. Brands should furthermore support their suppliers in providing adequate medical examinations and diagnostic procedures to ensure early diagnosis, treatment and compensation for workers suffering from silicosis or other related diseases.

Existing problems and illegal working conditions in factories should be adequately remediated, in conjunction with NGOs and independent trade unions. Freedom of association should be guaranteed to enable workers to voice and help rectify unsafe practices.

### 3) International bodies

We call on the ILO and WHO to include denim production chains in their global programmes focusing on the eradication of silicosis.

We call on the EU to explicitly ban the practice of sandblasting in the garment industry, and to implement an import ban on sandblasted jeans. We further call for the extensive reports of ongoing sandblasting practices within the EU itself, notably in Portugal and Italy, to be investigated, and the practice stopped.

Multi-stakeholder initiatives and businesses should ensure their members implement a total ban on sandblasting throughout their supply chains.

The full report, *Breathless for Blue Jeans: Health hazards in China's denim factories*, produced by Clean Clothes Campaign, IHLO, SACOM and War on Want in June 2013 is available to download from:

[www.cleanclothes.org/resources/publications/Breathless](http://www.cleanclothes.org/resources/publications/Breathless) and [www.waronwant.org/breathless](http://www.waronwant.org/breathless).

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